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THE DANCE MACABRE

A Pantomime

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THE DANCE MACABRE

A Pantomime

THE curtains of the tall French window are drawn aside and across its wide panes the massive cornice of the building opposite and the naked immensity of the skyscrapers beyond loom monstrous in the moonlight. Beyond the shadowy cliffs of steel and marble stretches a frozen sea of glimmering roofs and far away, hanging like a majestic constellation above the lesser stars of the river front, gleams the pale tiara of the Brooklyn bridge.

The city lies in sleep, the tormented, fitful sleep of the wickedest city in the world, broken now by the muttered raving of an elevated train, now by the despairing groan of a distant ferry-boat, or the muffled nightmare shriek of a vessel passing through Hell Gate.

Outside the French window, the low stone balustrade and the urn of growing ferns and flowers, that stands upon its ledge, make a sharp black pattern against the luminous picture of the sleeping city. The shadowy nasturtiums stir darkly and the black plumes of the overhanging ferns tremble in the faint night breeze.

Low and vibrant, as though the voice of the moonlight itself, comes the sound of the Metropolitan tower clock striking three and as the last stroke dies away a miniature cathedral clock somewhere in the dark room chimes an elfin echo.

For a moment the room is intensely still, then piercing the dull thickness of the wall comes the sound of quick footsteps in the hall outside. As the sound ceases abruptly, there is the low jiggle of a groping latchkey, followed by the click of the turning lock, then swiftly and silently the door is pushed open and as swiftly and silently closed and locked again, by the man who has entered and now stands quite still in the shadow of the portière.

The man is in evening dress. He wears a black opera cloak and opera hat. He stands close to the door and listens. His face is very white. Silently he draws the heavy portière across the door, then noiselessly, crossing the room to the French window, draws the long curtains over the moonlit panes.

Now the room is in darkness. Suddenly, with the click of some invisible button, comes a glow of light from a silk shaded electric lamp on a table near the centre of the room. Beside the table stands the man. His finger still touches the electric button of the lamp. His left hand clutches at his side, he breathes heavily, there are drops of moisture on his forehead that glisten in the light of the electric lamp.

The air of the room is stifling. He has taken off the heavy opera hat and laid it upon the table, now he tugs at the collar of his cloak breaking the fastening, and the white oblong of his shirt and waistcoat shines wanly in the lamplight as he throws back the folds of his cloak.

All at once the man is shaken as if by a blow from something invisible. He turns sharply. Probing with faltering eyes the obscurity of the darkling corners, he listens in an anguish of suspense for the repetition of that vague, muffled thumping, fearful as the beating of his own heart, faint as the flutter of an escaping soul. There is no sound but the ticking of the clock, one moment terribly loud, the next scarcely audible.

Released from the tension, the man drops into the chair beside the mahogany table and buries his head in his hands. The next instant he is sitting bolt upright, his nerves aquiver, like the antennae of a frightened insect.

What was it? Where was it? It was as if something without substance had brushed his face, something unseen had vanished.

The man jumps to his feet and hearkens fearfully. Moving with stealthy steps toward the door, he listens again in the shadow of the portière. There is no sound in the hall, no sound anywhere.

Once more the man stands by the table and his head is bowed and his face is hidden in his hands. But through his

hands peers something which no darkness can hide, no shielding hands can blot from view.

Thrusting out his arms with a violent movement as if to push away the dreadful vision, the black cloak slips from his shoulders and drops to the floor behind him.

At the same moment there comes the sound of a knock, appallingly loud, yet muffled, like the sound of a gloved fist upon a heavy oaken door. Instantly the man's body becomes rigid as with the shock of electrocution—his hands thrown back at his sides, his fingers extended, his wide staring eyes fixed upon the door, he waits for what must come.

For a long half minute he listens, scarcely daring to breathe, then as he feels the cloak about his feet, the power of reasoning returns.

Stooping quickly, he picks up the fallen cloak and from a pocket of it draws forth something that gleams wickedly in the lamp light. With a shudder, the man turns away his face as he places the revolver upon the table before him. Something like a white snake that had been coiled about the handle of the revolver slips unnoticed to the floor. It is the long glove of a woman and upon it is a bright red stain.

There is something moist on the man's right hand, something moist and clinging between his fingers. Holding his palm toward the light the man stares fascinated at the stained fingers, self-accusing witnesses whose lightest touch would print an irrefutable seal to their dreadful testimony, and a fit of trembling seizes him.

As he looks about in desperation his eye catches the gleam of white, unnatural white in the shadow of the table, and he starts as a horse starts at a white paper in a dark roadway.

Controlling himself with an immense effort, he stoops and picks up the glove, the long white glove of a woman, and the light falls upon the bright red stain.

The glove drops from the man's hand upon the table, as he shrinks back with shut eyes and distorted face.

Something passes before his closed lids, fanning his cheek with the faint chill of its passing. As he opens his eyes, the gray bulk of a huge moth lurches heavily against the lamp shade, rimmed with the blur of whirring wings and drumming

horribly against the stretched silk with a sound like distant death drums.

As the eyes of the man, at first dilated with the dread of what they feared to see, catch sight of the moth, their pupils contract with rage and hate.

Forgetting his horror of the bloody stain, he picks up the long snake-like glove and slashes viciously at the whirring shadow, striking only the lamp and leaving a moist translucent streak on the green silk shade.

Blanched with rage and abhorrence, the man turns sharply in the direction it has gone, but the moth has vanished. Only for a moment. Again the hateful thing appears and circles about the shaded lamp. Again the man strikes at it with the bloodstained glove and once more, like a mocking sprite, the moth soars out of reach and vanishes into the shadows.

Breathless and baffled, supporting himself against the chairback, the man waits, his hand still clutching the glove, the pupils of his eyes contracted with hate and fear, searching the darkened corners of the shadowy room.

As he gazes, hearkening, through the intense stillness, there comes again the sound of distant death drums, and along the ceiling, blurred and formless, reels the uncanny visitant, shockingly enlarged by its grey close-following shadow.

Nearer and nearer it comes and the man's hand shakes as he clutches the long glove of the dead woman. Now again it circles the lamp and beats its ghostly tattoo against the drum of the stretched silk shade. And the man's eyes, dreadful with the livid reflection of the lamplight, follow it as the eyes of a snake follow a fluttering bird.

Suddenly, as if dazed with the glare, the moth stumbles in its flight and falls clumsily upon the table. In an instant the lash of the descending glove has maimed it hopelessly. In vain it strives to rise, spinning round with whirring wings and standing grotesquely on its head like a fantastic acrobat. Again the glove descends and now the hateful thing lies crumpled, motionless.

Loathingly the man bends over the dead insect, shuddering anew as he sees upon its dark and battered thorax the grey symbol of mocking death. Picking it up by its frayed and

twisted wing, he carries it across the room to the window. With his hand upon the curtain, he pauses as if checked by a sudden fear, and returning quickly to the table, presses the button of the electric lamp extinguishing the light.

And now, as he draws aside the window curtain, the fear haunted room is purified by the gentle presence of the moonlight, blessing with silver hands the dark mahogany, (dark as blood) transmuting the lattice panes of the tall book-case to pale sapphire and turning the silver and the cut glass on the sideboard to pearl and opal.

Fearful of the dead creature he holds, and daring not to measure with his eyes the abyss before him, the man stretches his arm across the narrow balcony and flings the loathsome thing over the stone ledge, then, seized with a panic fancy that the winged horror may come to life and drag him with it into that floorless dark, he shuts and bolts the window with feverish haste and, drawing the curtain, feels his way back to the table and turns on the electric light.

The sight of the revolver and the bloodstained glove jerk him (as with the hangman's jerk) back from the dead horror of his fevered fancy to the living horror of himself.

Once more there reel through his brain, like moving picture films, the scenes of the past few hours. The Suspicion, the Proof, and Accusation, the Reproaches, the Pleading, the tears of the man that was himself, the taunts, the insults, the curses of that other, the woman, and through it all the growl of the piano in the room above, muttering the weird malisons of the Dance Macabre.

A cold sweat breaks out on the man's forehead; he presses his hands against his ears, but he cannot shut out the memory of the woman's shriek that echoed in his brain as he stumbled down the dark stairway.

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The cut glass decanter shakes in the man's hand as he pours out a full tumbler of brandy, and the thin glass clatters against his teeth as, clutching the sideboard for support, he drains it at a single gulp.

Even as he swallows it, the glow of the brandy is chilled by an icy fear that stiffens the shaking terror of the moment

before into a stony semblance of courage.

Motionless, with lifted glass, a grim caricature of good cheer, he glares fixedly at the long green window curtain.

There is something outside the window. Something—somebody—is knocking against the window. At first, light as the tap of a rainbent ivyleaf, faint as the drum of a moth's wing, with each thump of the man's heart it grows louder, more insistent.

But no ivy ever climbed to that window one hundred and fifty feet from the ground, no moth ever drummed to the grisly ragtime of the dance Macabre.

* * *

The brass rings make no sound as the heavy curtains are slowly drawn apart, there is no sound of a bolt as the glass doors are pushed open.

Standing in the moonlit window frame is the tall figure of a woman. Her face is grey white, her eyes are glazed and staring. Her mirthless lips are parted in a stark vermilion smile. Upon her left breast, close to the edge of her corsage, is a deep crimson spot, rimmed with livid purple, and the edge of the grey corsage is stained with crimson. A winglike fold of her moth grey ball dress is looped to either arm by a bangle of wrought silver. Her right arm is encased in a long white glove. Her left arm, save for the silver bangle, is bare. As the man gazes, his heart seems to stop beating. The empty glass, loosed from his fingers, falls splintering upon the floor. He tries to look away, but he cannot take his eyes from the woman's face. His lips form the twin syllables of her name but they make no sound.

The light of the lamp behind him falls full upon the woman's face, illuminating with terrible distinctness the glassy eyes and the changeless porcelain smile. As the man gazes, his fear gives place to a fascination that is fear intensified.

Suddenly there is the click of an electric button and the light of the lamp goes out.

A new terror clutching at his heart, the man turns his head and there, by the mahogany table, her pale eyes and the frozen laughter of her mouth gleaming in the moonlight,

stands the woman, her arm extended as she draws over it the long white bloodstained glove.

With shaking knees, catching for support the sideboard, the sofa, anything that offers, the man edges his way towards the door, his only thought to get out into the street, no matter what the risk. The woman neither stirs nor turns her eyes, yet as he moves, their glassy stare seems to follow him as the painted eyes of some sinister pictured face in a portrait gallery.

Covering his eyes with his hands, he sinks into the nearest seat, a long low sofa covered with heavy Kelim drapery. As he crouches trembling, his face buried in his hands sobbing incoherent prayers, cursing his cowardice that he durst not turn the pistol upon himself, there comes to his ears the dull complaining voice of a piano in the room above.

That there is no apartment above the one he is in, nothing but the steel girders supporting the roof, does not seem strange to him. At first confused and unrecognizable, each moment the music grows more distinct, until presently the whole room shudders with the unearthly syncopation of the dance Macabre.

As the man listens, unspeakably awed, not daring to uncover his face, something light as a cobweb brushes across the back of his hands.

* * *

She seemed to float rather than to dance. To the man's fancy it was as if the demon music cast a shadow and this was the shadow. A tortured soul tossed on the stygian sound waves of that unearthly melody, poisoning, drifting, now a shapely nix writhing in the moonlight, now a formless shadow slouching in the darkness, as the thin web of her draperies alternately flouts or caresses her swaying body. Now as she circles towards him, she beckons with her hands, but in her staring eyes is neither speech nor invitation.

Mastered by an overwhelming impulse as abhorrent as it is beyond control, the man moves forward to meet her with arms outspread, but as he closes them about her, the woman melts from his clasp and slips, staring and beckoning into the shadow.

Round and round the dim room dance the strange speechless pair like tormented motes in the quiet moonlight, the

woman moth-like, repulsive, the man mad with hate and desire, a maniacal marionette grotesquely pied in the black and white of evening dress, and the deathly pallor of his distorted face, now laughing, now sobbing hysterically, but never pausing in the mad measure, as round and round the dim room he follows the grey woman, stretching out his arms beseechingly and clasping nothing, clutching savagely with tense fingers and gripping only the air.

* * *

At last baffled and panting from exhaustion, he drops heavily upon the low sofa, his finger nails piercing the coarse weave of the Kelim rug. The music, as if it too has spent its evil forces, has changed to a low tremulous waltz measure through whose grieving cadence now and again (like a skeleton tramping through swaying lilies), jigs the ghastly motif of the dance Macabre.

Across the room, dimly cameoed against the greying sapphire panes of the tall bookcase, stands the woman with drooping arms and head thrown back as though swooning to the dying throbs of the waltz.

As the man watches her from the sofa, his tense fingers clutching the fabric of its draped covering, a change comes over his white drawn face. In the graying light from the window, his eyes have the glint of steel.

With a cry like a tortured animal, he grips the rug in both his hands and springing upon the woman crushes her body beneath its heavy folds.

There is no sound but the sound of breaking glass as the man stumbles forward against the door of the bookcase and the rug falls limply to the floor.

As he looks from the shattered glass and the unbroken row of books behind it, to the disordered drapery at his feet, moved by a strange impulse, the man stoops and lifts a corner of the rug.

Upon the floor before him, where a moment before the heavy fabric had lain, a grey Thing stirs uncouthly. As he draws back with physical loathing, the moth, with a shruglike movement, lifts itself into the air and circles about his head in uncanny sprawling flight.

Covering his face with his arms, in abject terror the man stumbles blindly about the room, round and round the mahogany table, past the sofa, past the bookcase again, followed at every turn by the circling moth, and cringing with unspeakable horror under the ceaseless thud of its soft body, the chill breath of its whirring wings upon his hot hands, his burning forehead.

Now, with unsteady feet and lowered head buried in his arms, with no thought but to escape the torment of the buzzing Maenad, the man stumbles blindly over the threshold of the open window and, stretching out his arms to save himself, falls forward with all his weight, clutching desperately at the urn of flowers that stands upon the low balcony.

There is a sharp crunching sound of loosening concrete as the slender urn tips slowly outwards with the man's weight.

Unable to regain his balance or to release his hold on the toppling urn, his feet straining in futile resistance as they are lifted from the ground, the man tips stiffly and quietly forward like a mechanical figure.

As the moth plunges silently upward into the cold deeps of the morning, from the pavement far below comes faintly the crash of shivering stone.

CURTAIN.

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